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Assistant Secretary Ellen Sauerbrey Opens Doors for Burmese Refugees

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration visited refugees in Thailand in late August 2006 to highlight the plight of thousands of survivors of persecution and conflict. There are an estimated 150,000 refugees from Burma living in nine camps on the Thai-Burma border. Some of the refugees have been in these camps for up to 20 years, while others arrived in recent months.

The two officials made a special trip to Tham Hin camp, located in densely forested hills 140 miles west of Bangkok and about 7 miles from the Burma-Thailand border. About 10,000 ethnic Karen refugees from Burma live in Tham Hin camp. The Karens are one of many ethnic minority groups who live in remote areas in Burma and have different traditions from the ethnic Burmese. Camp populations could swell, however, as violent Burmese military raids continue in Karen State.

High Commissioner Guterres and Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey thanked the Thai government for protecting many refugees who flee to Thailand to escape persecution or worse in their own countries. They encouraged the Thai government to allow refugees to benefit from income-generation programs and other work opportunities outside the camp. High Commissioner Guterres also thanked the United States for welcoming tens of thousands of refugees every year.

During their visit to the Tham Hin camp, the two officials cheered for 63 Karen refugees as they departed the camp for a new life in the United States. This is just the beginning of a larger resettlement operation. The High Commissioner paid tribute to the Department of State and to the Assistant Secretary for her role in facilitating the resettlement to the U.S. of some 2,700 Karen in the near future. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Department of State are partners in this endeavor. UNHCR is working with a number of other countries – including Canada, Australia, Britain, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden and Norway – to boost the number of Karen refugees accepted for resettlement from Thailand.

Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey assured those in the camp that, “we encourage all who are interested to step forward” for U.S. resettlement consideration, noting that the U.S. welcomed 54,000 refugees from 55 countries in the previous year.

Immediately prior to visiting Thailand, the Assistant Secretary also traveled to Bangladesh and Malaysia. ■



(left to right) Ellen Sauerbrey, Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration at the Tham Hin Camp in Thailand on August 29, 2006 with International Organization for Migration (IOM) Regional Representative Irena Vojackova-Sollorano, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, and IOM Regional Cultural Orientation Coordinator Peter Salnikowski at an IOM cultural orientation class for Karen refugee children.



Source: U.S. State Department

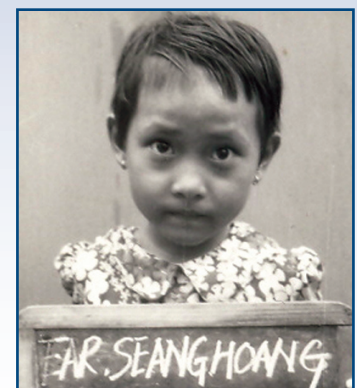
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Courtesy of Jessica Adler

Giving Back: The Jessica Adler Story



Bangkok, Thailand, August 28, 2006 (From left to right): Michael Honnold, Refugees Coordinator, U.S. Embassy Bangkok, Jessica Adler, Deputy Refugee Coordinator, Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, Eileen Kelley, Program Officer in PRM, and Ellen Sauerbrey, Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM).

Hoang Seang Ear remembers the huge swells and the boat pitching and rolling dangerously from side to side. Peering out the porthole at an angry South China Sea, she saw a Red Cross boat far in the distance. For three nights and four days her father steered their boat with its precious cargo of 437 refugees, his wife, five daughters, son, brother and sister-in-law and their children away from the danger of Vietnam.

The year was 1978. The North Vietnamese army had taken Saigon two years before, but a violent communist-lead assault still raged in the South. Thousands of South Vietnamese civilians fled for their lives. Hoang's father, an ethnic Chinese, had fled from Pol Pot's ominous advances in Cambodia into Vietnam in 1974, only to have to flee again.



Young Haong (left) with her two younger sisters on the beach on Pulau Island.

Little Hoang Seang Ear was four years old. Their final perilous journey is now family lore. Hoang's mother still loves to tell how her brave husband, one dark and stormy night, saved them all from certain death from pirates, and of the rescue of the women and children from their sinking vessel by a western ship. Hoang remembers how happy her mother was when her father later found them all safe and sound in Pulau Galang, an Indonesian island.

On Pulau Galang the children lived the life of island urchins, hunting and foraging for food, fishing and catching snakes to eat and sleeping under plastic sheeting on the beach. Rice was the only staple. The boat passengers stuck together and were joined by hundreds of other desperate refugees. One proud man living in a nearby tent carved a chicken drumstick out of wood and noisily licked it in front of the hungry children. After a few months, the whole family (Hoang's parents, her aunt and uncle and their combined 10 children) were relocated to a camp in Terampas where they lived for two years. Her enterprising father fixed watches to feed his family, and tried not to mourn his earlier life as the owner of a prosperous helicopter factory in Cambodia. Hoang remembers vividly the kindness of visiting American refugee aid workers.

Haong remembers the day the resettlement buzz began. The adults were arguing and excited. England, Germany, Japan and the United States, among other countries, were accepting refugees. "We have to choose," her father told the family. Hoang, who was then

six years old, remembers her mother settling the argument. "I want to go to the United States where my five daughters will have the most opportunities."

All the children were allowed to choose American names and pursue the American dream. Jessica has lived that dream and has never for a day forgotten the kindness of many people along the way. A Presbyterian church in Vienna, Virginia, sponsored her family. Her father, always the entrepreneur, eventually opened a jewelry store where he still repaired watches. Jessica fulfilled her mother's aspirations. A straight-A student in high school, she ultimately finished college at George Mason University and law school at the University of Hawaii, and passed the California bar exam.

She has retraced her family's journey from Cambodia, Saigon, Malaysia and Indonesia and gives thanks every day to friends, family and strangers who helped her along the way. Jessica is now a Deputy Refugee Coordinator at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, living with her husband, Clay Adler, a Foreign Service Officer. Her job is to help other survivors of war and conflict. She frequently visits refugee camps along the Thai Burma border. "Every time I see a barefooted refugee child, I think of myself running around in a refugee camp many years ago. Much like the aid workers who helped my family obtain a better life, I am proud to be able to help those who are fleeing persecution and conflict."

WHO IS A REFUGEE:

The 1951 UN Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees provide the most commonly used definition. They define a "refugee" as any person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence... is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." The U.S. is a party to the 1967 Protocol, which effectively incorporates all relevant provisions of the 1951 Convention.

Love Thy Neighbor: an America Legacy

Barbara Day is visibly uncomfortable talking about herself. After decades of working with refugees, this South Dakota native still shakes her head in disbelief and awe. "Americans welcome and nurture upward of 40,000-70,000 refugees every year for permanent resettlement," Day says. These new Americans are mostly wounded and afraid, but all are survivors of persecution, even torture, and all have chosen to seek a new life in a new land. Day knows well because she manages the team of State Department officers that oversees the reception and placement program for refugees being resettled in the United States.

"I was brought up with a sense of obligation to express my beliefs in concrete actions to help others. We live in a shared community," Day explains. After college, Day left South Dakota, to teach at a Lutheran middle school in a village outside Hong Kong near the Chinese border.

Back in Sioux Falls three years later, Day volunteered for the Lutheran Social Services to teach English to refugees from Southeast

Asia settling in South Dakota. And a few years later, Day again tested her commitment to help others less fortunate by returning to Asia to teach children on the remote Pacific Ocean island of Babelthau, in the Republic of Palau.

South Dakota's Lutheran Social Services organization and churches in communities throughout the state form the core of a complex state-wide network of volunteers and paid professionals dedicated to making refugees feel welcome and supported as they reestablish homes and livelihoods in their new land. Its services include health, housing, employment, English language instruction, interpretation, immigration legal services, and protection for those most at risk.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provides the public safety net for refugees and funds on-going integration services, but most refugees get jobs within 90 days after arrival. Day, for example, helped the Hmong women of Laos form a cooperative to market their embroidery. The Lutheran Church's national organization, the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, ultimately hired Day to work in its headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland.

In her present job as the Domestic Resettlement Section Chief in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the State Department since 2005, Day draws on her life and professional experiences to oversee and manage the program that matches arriving refugees with voluntary agency sponsors and ensures that refugees receive a warm reception and critical support from the moment they arrive in the United States.

Day's program ensures that refugees are assigned to one of the ten agencies that work under contract with the State Department to serve as sponsors, and that they are appropriately located in the right city or town, taking into consideration the special needs of the refugee family. The availability of affordable housing to accommodate large extended families is often a critical criterion, for example. Placing refugees in communities near extended families or friends is also an important consideration.

"The commitment of the staffs and volunteers at the 350 local offices affiliated with the ten agencies is the secret to successful resettlement," Day said. "It is an art, and a successful outcome for a self-reliant, contributing new community member is the goal," Day adds. "I feel privileged to have this job," Day concludes quietly.

RELATED LINKS

- PRM CONTRACT AGENCIES:
CHURCH WORLD SERVICE (CWS)
<http://www.churchworldservice.org/>
- DOMESTIC & FOREIGN
MISSIONARY SOCIETY (DRMS)
<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/emf/>
- ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL (ECDC)
<http://www.ecdcinternational.org/>
- HEBREW IMMIGRANT AID SOCIETY (HIAS)
<http://www.hias.org/>
- BUREAU OF REFUGEE PROGRAMS, IOWA
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
<http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/refugee/bureau/default.asp>
- INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (IRC)
<http://www.theirc.org/about/>
- LUTHERAN IMMIGRATION
& REFUGEE SERVICE (LIRS)
<http://www.lirs.org/>
- UNITED STATES COMMITTEE FOR
REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS (USCRI)
<http://www.uscra.org/>
- UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF
CATHOLIC BISHOPS (USCCB)
<http://www.usccb.org/mrs/>
- WORLD RELIEF (WR)
<http://www.wr.org>
- U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT/
STATE REFUGEE COORDINATORS
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/partners/coordinator.html>



Barbara Day, Domestic Resettlement Section Chief in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the State Department.



Bosnian refugee Dragana Katalina Sun and her Chinese husband Sun Da at their restaurant in Charlottesville, Virginia. Charlottesville hosts about 150 refugees every year from 22 countries.



Ellen Sauerbrey, Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) surrounded by PRM and International Rescue Committee (IRC) staff during an orientation visit to IRC's Charlottesville, Virginia office on November 21, 2006. IRC is one of the 10 national agencies contracted by the Department of State to manage refugee resettlements in the U.S.

Helping the Homeless in Colombia

Second only to Sudan, Colombia has one of the world's largest internally displaced populations. There are more than three million unfortunate Colombian men, women and children, who cannot go home because of decades of internal strife and violent assaults by rebels and narco-traffickers. In a country the size of Texas, Arkansas and New Mexico combined, with approximately 41 million inhabitants, protecting and assisting this internally displaced population demands a huge humanitarian response. The Colombian government is doing a lot to help its own citizens, but alone cannot meet all the needs.

Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration Ellen Sauerbrey went to Colombia in early November 2006 to review U.S. government, and her own Bureau's, assistance programs for the displaced. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration devotes about \$16.5 million annually to help feed and house displaced Colombians during the first 90 days when their needs are the greatest. "They need shelter. They need emergency food and non-food items. These are traumatized people. Children saw parents murdered. You can't visit Colombia and not see the tragedy of people who have lost everything," Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey explained.

In Cali, Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey visited some of the emergency temporary shelters run by the International Committee of the Red Cross, a major implementing partner. Frankly, she noted, they "look like they are going to become permanent shelters." When she talked with the displaced about their hopes and aspirations for going home, they told her, "No, we don't think we'll ever be able to get home."

There are no easy solutions, but clearly people prefer hope over despair. Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey explained that after urgent security and shelter needs are met, the U.S. favors providing basic education and vocational training.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an important supporter of many of these programs that allow people to support themselves and make a new life. Women can learn to be auto mechanics; men learn how to make shoes. USAID funds \$31 million in development assistance through partners such as the World Food Program, International Organization for Migration, the Pan American Development Foundation, and non-governmental organizations.



State Department photo



State Department photo



State Department photo

Top: Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Ellen Sauerbrey at a school in Soacha, a Bogota suburb, where many internally displaced Colombians now live. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provides funds to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the primary implementing partner for this project.

Bottom Left: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees supports a legal aid clinic, The "House of Rights" in Soacha, Colombia.

Bottom Right: A Colombian man in Cali learns to make shoes at a vocational training class run by the Cooperation Housing Foundation, a partnering non-governmental organization.

One of the best ways to keep children from becoming child soldiers is to give them options through education and to keep them at school. In Soacha, a village near Bogota, Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey visited a program for children, which gives them a year of counseling to recover from the trauma and to learn basic skills, so they can then return to a regular classroom and succeed.

The Colombian government ultimately needs to focus on bringing a peaceful solution to the conflict and on long-term economic development. Meanwhile, the real solutions are in the programs that allow people to develop a skill and find a job and be able to take care of

themselves and their families. These efforts are all part of a long term solution for Colombia. ■

BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND MIGRATION U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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